



LEXUS

WALLS THAT TALK

THE NEW ECO DESIGN

VIRTUOUS VACATIONS | SHEA BUTTER | BALTIC AMBER

Clockwise from top left: a Backen-designed barn, residence, outdoor dining area, and refinished barn interior

napa's new style

Quietly and without fanfare, an “elegant barn” aesthetic is transforming the landscape and interiors of Napa Valley. Architect and Lexus owner Howard Backen is a key player behind the trend. His portfolio reads like a select wine list, from elegant farmhouses to exclusive hostelrys. The architect’s love affair with rustic style started when he was a boy. “In Oregon where I grew up, there are a lot of barns. There’s a certain scale of a barn sitting in a field that’s magnificent—the drama of the barn in the landscape.”

Rural materials, like the metal roof on his “ag building” design for the Press restaurant in St. Helena, pay homage to the farmyard style. “It’s not easy talking clients into corrugated materials, but I love using them,” he says. Backen’s earliest rural buildings were for

Robert Redford’s extensive Sundance complex in Utah. He’s worked off and on with Redford over the past 15 years, attracting the attention of San Francisco developer Bill Harlan, who invited him to Napa to create an integrated wine estate for Harlan’s prestige Bond and Harlan Estate wines.

In such luxe properties as Meadowood Resort’s tree line cottages and the Poetry Inn, Backen has refined his rural design aesthetic through scale. Several design elements he’s known for are trestle ceilings, deck showers, and “pocket doors”—glass walls specially designed by Backen to integrate the landscape into rooms. These last are featured in winegrower Freddy Constant’s hilltop pool house, while the main residence has no upper cabinets

to impede views, and the owners use their deck shower every day. Backen himself never showers indoors. “It was 34 degrees in Napa this morning—it felt great!”

His bathrooms celebrate the art of fine bathing, in deference to his Scandinavian roots. Radiant-heated floor tiles, sink consoles made with fine woods, and shaded meditation porches all engage the senses.

For Backen, site and environment are central to powerful design. An existing Craftsman-style cottage offered a starting point for Cliff Lede’s winery complex with tasting room and art gallery. And Napa’s agricultural zoning offers protection from strip malls and subdivisions, which Backen appreciates. “A rural barn building in an urban setting does not work.” —Kia McInerney



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